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ABSTRACT

Although the United States' overall trend reflects a more educated population, significant differences in educational attainment remain with regard to age, sex, race, and origin. Nevertheless, the educational attainment of young adults (ages 25 to 29) indicates a dramatic improvement by groups who have historically been less educated. This report provides information on basic educational trends and attainment levels across many segments of the population. The findings are based on data collected in the Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 1999 and refer to the population 25 years and over unless otherwise specified. Overall, educational attainment levels were higher for men than for women. However, for the population ages 25 to 29, educational levels of women exceeded those of men. Additional data are supplied for race, marital status, the labor force, and the foreign born. (DFR)

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Educational Attainment in the United States

Population Characteristics

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Current Population Reports

By Eric C. Newburger and Andrea Curry

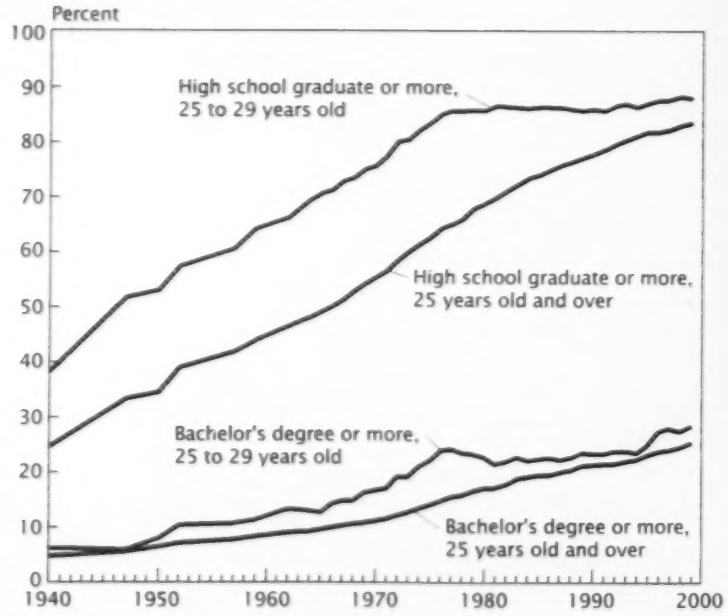
Educational attainment is one of the most important influences on economic well-being. More education tends to be reflected in greater socio-economic success for individuals and the country. Although the United States' overall trend reflects a more educated population, significant differences in educational attainment remain with regard to age, sex, race, and origin. Nevertheless, the educational attainment of young adults (ages 25 to 29), which provides a glimpse of our country's future, indicates a dramatic improvement by groups who have historically been less educated.

This report provides information on basic educational trends and attainment levels across many segments of the population. The findings are based on data collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 1999 and refer to the population 25 years and over unless otherwise specified.

Defining Educational Attainment

A single question on the Current Population Survey, which now asks for the highest grade or degree completed, is used to determine educational attainment. Before 1992, educational attainment was measured only by years of completed schooling.

Figure 1.
Percent of the Population Who Have Completed High School or College: Selected Years 1940 to 1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

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Americans are more educated than ever.

The percentage of the adult population who had completed high school continued to rise in 1999, following a general trend that the Current Population Survey has noted since educational attainment was first measured in 1947 (Figure 1). In March 1999, over four-fifths (83 percent) of all adults age 25 or older reported they had completed at least high school, a record high; one in four adults (25 percent) had attained at least a bachelor's degree.

The increase in young adults' educational attainment may be leveling off.

Almost 9 in 10 (88 percent) young adults ages 25 to 29 had completed high school by 1999; this percentage was not different from that recorded in 1998 and 1997. Over the last 20 years, annual estimates of high school completion among young adults have been in the range of 85-88 percent.

The percentage of young adults who had completed a bachelor's degree in 1999 (28 percent) was statistically equivalent to the record high level recorded in 1998. During the past two decades, the proportion of the young adult population with a bachelor's degree changed only modestly, with the proportion remaining above 20 percent.

The younger population is more educated than the older population.

As shown in Table A, the percentage who had completed high school was substantially higher for younger age groups than for older — 63 percent of those age 75 and older had completed high school compared with 88 percent for ages 25 to 29. Similarly, for postsecondary schooling, one-eighth (13 percent) of the population age 75 and older had a bachelor's degree compared with 28 percent of the 25 to 29 population. Given the very large differences in education between younger and older age groups, the attainment level of the total adult population will continue to rise for some

Table A.
Summary Measures of the Educational Attainment of the Population, Ages 25 and Over: March 1999

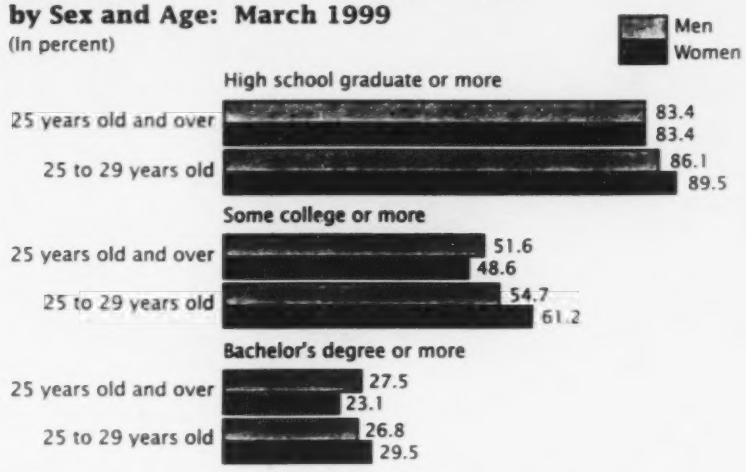
(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristics	Number of people	Percentage with		
		High school graduate or more	Some college or more	Bachelor's degree or more
Population ages 25 and over	173,754	83.4	50.1	25.2
Age group:				
25 to 29 years old	18,639	87.8	58.2	28.2
30 to 34 years old	19,835	87.7	56.0	29.2
35 to 39 years old	22,529	87.6	53.1	26.9
40 to 44 years old	22,215	88.5	55.1	27.2
45 to 49 years old	19,166	89.2	57.2	29.9
50 to 54 years old	16,066	87.4	55.9	29.5
55 to 59 years old	12,601	83.3	47.3	24.7
60 to 64 years old	10,308	78.5	40.6	20.3
65 to 69 years old	9,320	75.3	38.1	18.6
70 to 74 years old	8,524	69.2	33.1	15.5
75 years or older	14,551	62.7	30.1	13.2
Sex:				
Men	82,917	83.4	51.6	27.5
Women	90,837	83.4	48.6	23.1
Race and Origin:				
Non-Hispanic Total	157,329	85.0	52.2	26.7
Non-Hispanic White	130,411	87.7	53.4	27.7
Non-Hispanic Black	19,261	77.4	41.4	15.5
Non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander	6,467	84.7	62.3	42.4
Hispanic	16,425	56.1	29.2	10.9
White	146,080	84.3	50.8	25.9
Black	19,732	77.0	41.3	15.4
Nativity:				
Native	152,560	85.9	51.3	25.2
Foreign born	21,193	65.7	41.3	25.4
Marital status:				
Never married	26,052	84.6	54.7	29.5
Married spouse present	108,011	85.2	52.6	26.7
Married spouse absent	6,800	74.3	41.7	16.5
Separated	4,430	75.3	41.0	13.6
Widowed	13,477	62.9	27.5	10.8
Divorced	19,413	84.8	48.5	19.4
Region:				
Northeast	34,013	84.6	48.3	27.6
Midwest	40,016	86.2	49.6	24.0
South	61,456	80.7	47.5	23.4
West	38,269	83.7	56.2	27.3
Metropolitan residence:				
Metropolitan area	139,714	84.3	52.5	27.5
Nonmetropolitan area	34,039	79.6	39.9	15.7

Note: Hispanics may be of any race. Data for races shown do not sum to the total population; data for non-Hispanic American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut are not shown.

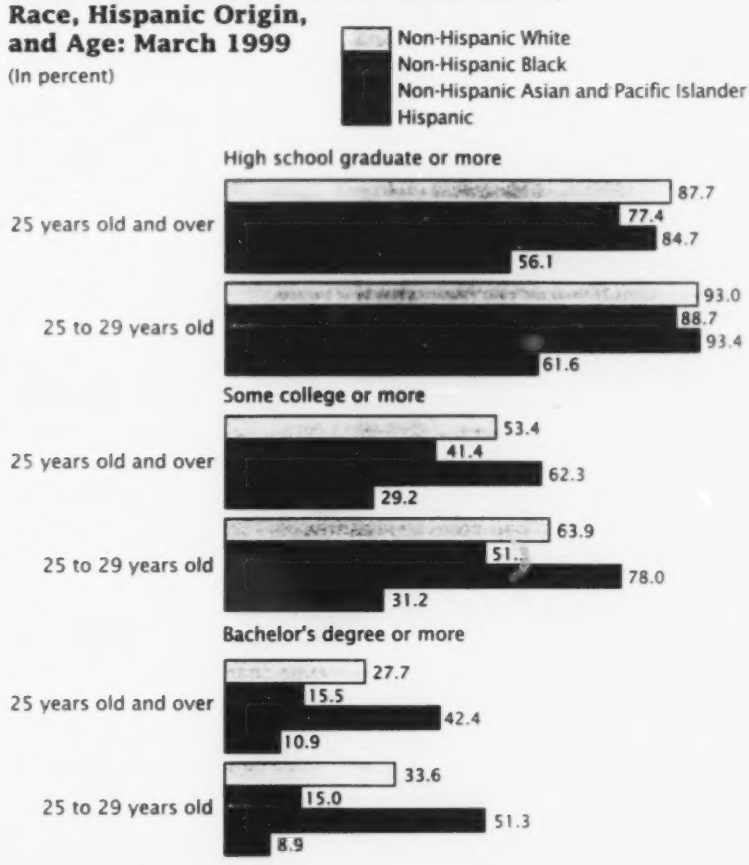
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Figure 2.
Differences in Educational Attainment by Sex and Age: March 1999
(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Figure 3.
Differences in Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: March 1999
(In percent)



Note: Hispanics may be of any race.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

time, as younger, more educated age groups replace older, less educated ones, even if attainment levels for young adults remain constant.

Educational attainment differs by socio-economic factors and geographic location.

Sex: Overall, educational attainment levels were higher for men than for women on 2 of the 3 measures shown in Table A. Statistically, men and women had the same rate of high school completion (83 percent). In fact, the last time a statistical difference existed was in 1989. However, for post-secondary schooling, men had higher college attainment levels than women, with 28 percent of men but only 23 percent of women having a bachelor's degree or more, and 52 percent of men and 49 percent of women having completed some college or more.

However, for the population ages 25 to 29, educational attainment levels of women exceeded those of men (Figure 2). At the high school level, 90 percent of these young women had completed high school, compared with 86 percent of young men. At the college level, 30 percent of women and 27 percent of men had earned a bachelor's degree or more. The last year young women and men had equal rates of high school and college attainment was 1995.

Race: The percentage of high school graduates varies by race (Figure 3). Among non-Hispanic Whites, 88 percent were high school graduates or more, a record high. The percentage of non-Hispanic Black high school graduates (77 percent) remained at its 1998 peak. The percentage of high school graduates among non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders (85 percent) remained at the 1998 peak.

Differences in the percentages of non-Hispanic Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites who had completed high school narrowed, as the proportion of non-Hispanic Black students obtaining a high school diploma increased considerably during the past decade. For the population 25 and over, the difference between the two groups in the proportion of high school graduates decreased from 16 percentage points in 1989 (65 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks and 81 percent of non-Hispanic Whites) to about 10 percentage points in 1999.

The difference in high school attainment for young adults (ages 25 to 29) between non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks was 4 percentage points (93 percent for non-Hispanic Whites compared with 89 percent for non-Hispanic Blacks). This percentage difference did not change significantly from that in 1989.

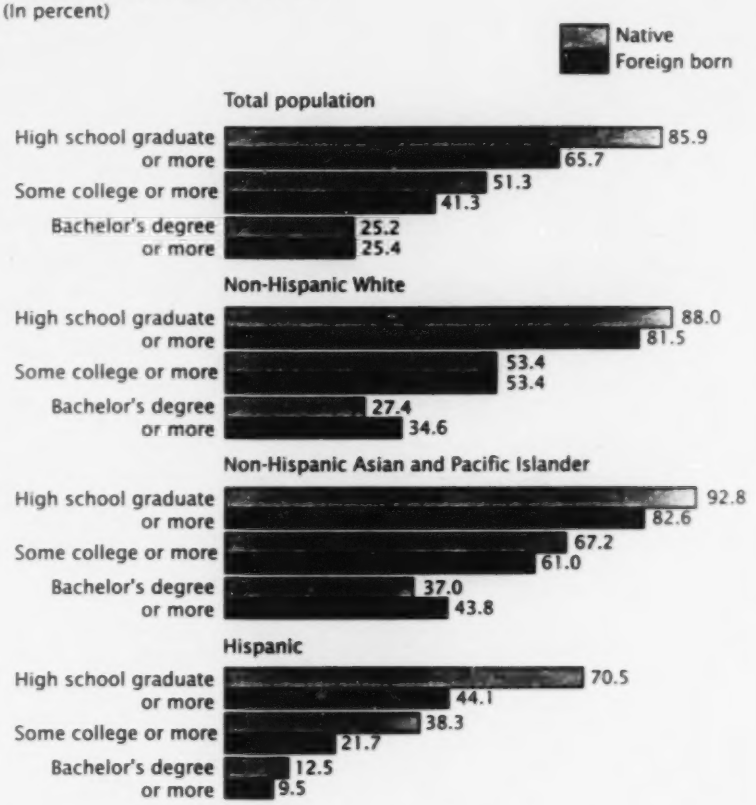
Non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders have the greatest proportion of college graduates. For those ages 25 and over, 42 percent of non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders had a bachelor's degree or more, compared with 28 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, and 16 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks. Even among young adults (ages 25 to 29), non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders had significantly higher college completion levels—51 percent compared with 34 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and 15 percent of non-Hispanic Blacks.

Hispanic origin: At all three levels of attainment (high school, some college, and college graduates), the Hispanic population (who may be of any race) has the lowest proportion of completed education, in comparison with non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, and non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders. Just over one-half (56 percent) of Hispanic adults were high school graduates or more, over one-fourth (29 percent) had completed some college, and about one in ten (11 percent) had completed a bachelor's degree or more.

Compared with a decade ago, the Hispanic population has experienced some gains in educational attainment. The proportion of the population ages 25 and over with a high school diploma or more increased about 5 percentage points from the 1989 level, which was 51 percent; the proportion who had some college increased about 6 percentage points; however, the proportion with a bachelor's degree or more did not change significantly.

The educational attainment of the young Hispanic population (ages 25 to 29) was substantially lower, however, than for other groups. Moreover, during the past decade, the young adult Hispanic population showed no significant change at the high school level (61 percent in 1989 and 62 percent in 1999) and no significant change at the bachelor's or more level (10 percent in 1989 and 9 percent in 1999).

Figure 4.
Differences in Educational Attainment by Nativity: March 1999
(In percent)



Note: Population ages 25 years and over. Hispanics may be of any race.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Table B.
Educational Attainment by Labor Force Status and Occupation: March 1999

(Numbers in thousands)

Labor force status and occupation	Number of people	Percentage with High School graduate or more	Percentage with Some college or more	Percentage with Bachelor's degree or more
Civilian labor force, 25 years and over				
Employed	112,514	89.9	57.7	30.4
Not employed	4,068	77.2	40.6	16.2
Not in the labor force	56,566	70.7	35.3	15.4
Occupation of employed people, 25 to 64 years old	108,600	90.2	58.0	30.5
Executive, admin., and managerial	17,721	97.8	77.7	49.8
Professional specialty occupations	18,575	99.2	93.4	76.7
Technicians and related support occ.	3,558	98.8	78.5	30.4
Sales occupations	11,867	94.0	61.8	31.1
Administrative support occupations including clerical	15,027	96.3	55.2	15.6
Private household occupations	568	59.5	20.4	5.6
Other service occupations	12,070	79.9	36.7	8.5
Farming, forestry, and fishing	2,308	70.3	29.2	11.4
Precision prod., craft, and repair	12,623	83.7	37.4	7.9
Machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors	6,288	75.1	24.0	4.4
Transportation and material moving	4,483	80.2	26.1	4.4
Handlers, equip. cleaners, helpers, and laborers	3,513	72.1	23.7	5.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Table C.
Average 1998 Earnings by Educational Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin, for All Workers, Ages 18 and Over

Characteristic	Total	Not a high school graduate	High school graduate	Some college or Associate degree	Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree
Total	$30,928	$16,053	$23,594	$27,566	$43,782	$63,473
Men	$38,134	$19,155	$28,742	$34,179	$55,057	$77,217
Women	$22,818	$11,353	$17,898	$21,056	$31,452	$44,954
Non-Hispanic White	$33,336	$16,837	$24,801	$28,753	$45,342	$65,461
Non-Hispanic Black	$22,887	$13,473	$19,225	$23,091	$36,543	$44,939
Hispanic	$22,117	$15,832	$20,978	$23,897	$35,014	$62,583

Note: Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Foreign born: The percentage of the foreign-born population with a high school diploma was dramatically lower than the native population, but paradoxically, the percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or more was approximately the same (Figure 4). For both the Hispanic population and the non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander population, the proportions with a high school diploma were significantly greater for natives than for the foreign born. Indeed, the proportion of foreign-born Hispanics with less than a high school education was almost twice as high as that for native Hispanics (56 percent compared with 30 percent). This factor contributes to the low attainment levels of the entire Hispanic population.

In contrast, the proportion of non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders with a bachelor's degree or more was significantly higher for the foreign-born population than the native population (44 percent and 37 percent, respectively). Among Hispanics, however, the proportion with a bachelor's degree or more was significantly lower for the foreign born than for the native population (10 percent and 13 percent).

Marital status: Differences in educational attainment by marital status reflect, to a large extent, differences in age composition. For example, the high level of high school completion among the never married population (85 percent) reflects this group's relatively youthful age distribution. Conversely, the low level among widowed people (63 percent) is in part attributable to this group's older age distribution. A similar pattern is seen in college completion levels.

Labor force: Educational attainment is higher for the employed than for the unemployed population, who in turn generally have higher attainment than those who are not in the labor force.[1] Among employed people, educational attainment is quite high, with 90 percent of them having completed high school, and 30 percent having completed a bachelor's degree (Table B).

[1] The unemployed and those not in the labor force did not differ significantly in their attainment of bachelor's degrees.

Occupation: Educational attainment also varied across occupational categories. While 99 percent of the workers in professional specialty occupations had completed high school, only 60 percent of private household workers had done so. In 1999, 77 percent of people in professional specialty occupations had completed a bachelor's degree or more, the highest level across the major occupational groups. For many occupations, however, less than 10 percent of the workers had completed college, including categories such as precision production workers and machine operators.

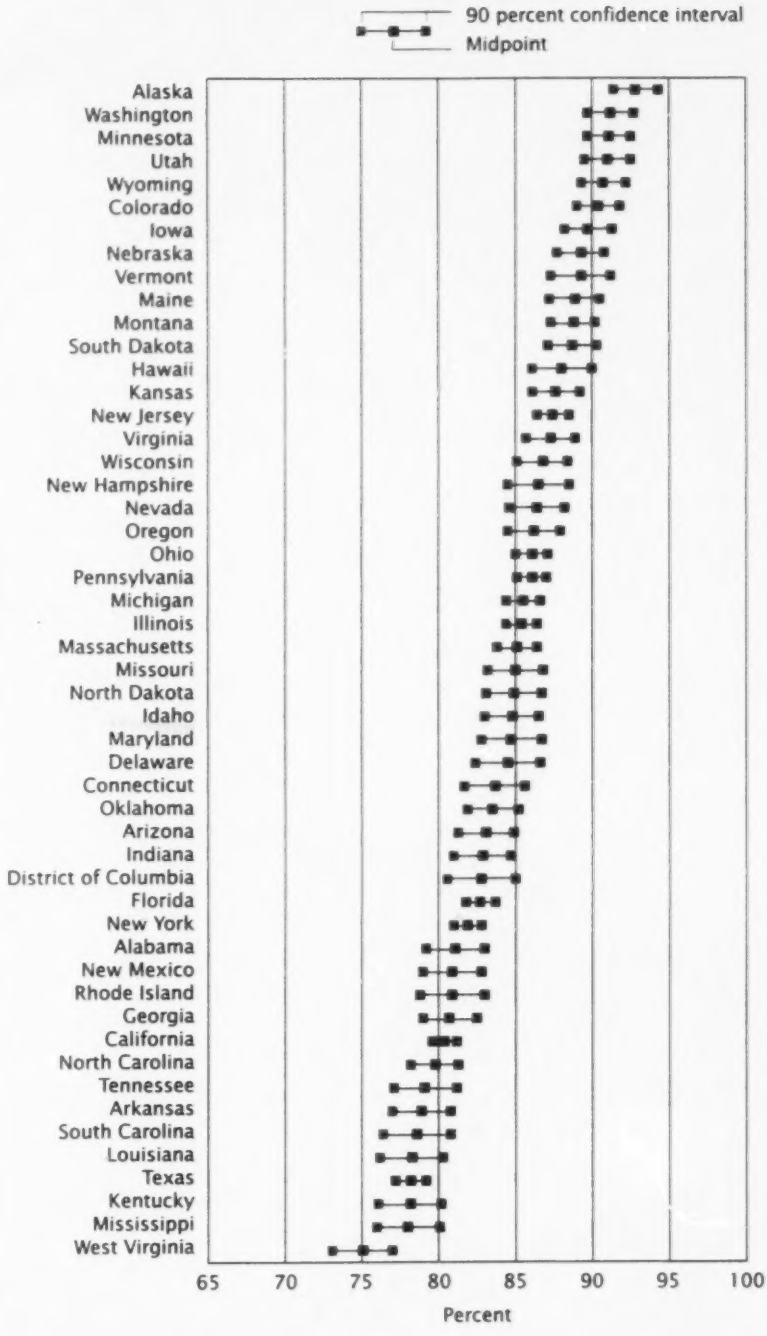
Earnings: Earnings for the population 18 years and over were higher at each progressively higher level of education (Table C). This relationship holds true not only for the entire population but also across each subgroup defined by sex, race, and Hispanic origin. Within each specific educational level, earnings differ by sex and race. This variation may result from a variety of factors, such as occupation, amount of time worked, age, or labor force experience.

Regions and states: The South had the lowest level of educational attainment. Among the four census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), the proportion of people who had completed high school ranged from 81 percent in the South to 86 percent in the Midwest.

The West was highest in the completion of some college or more (56 percent), and the Northeast and West were highest in the completion of a bachelor's degree or more (28 percent and 27 percent, respectively, which were not statistically different). Attainment levels were higher in metropolitan areas than in nonmetropolitan areas.

Figure 5.

Percent of High School Graduates for the Population Ages 25 and Over, by State: March 1999



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

The states with the highest high school graduation rates were Alaska, Washington, Minnesota, and Utah (Figure 5). Although Alaska had the highest point estimate at 93 percent, its value was not statistically different from that of Washington, Minnesota, and Utah.[2] Many of the states with lower rates of high school completion were in the South. West Virginia had the lowest high school completion rate point estimate at 75 percent.

The pattern was somewhat different with regard to levels of bachelor's degree completion. Washington D.C., with the largest point estimate of 42 percent, was not statistically different from Colorado. At the bottom of the list, Arkansas, with the smallest point estimate of 17 percent, was not statistically different from Tennessee, West Virginia, Indiana, Mississippi, and Kentucky.

Source of the Data

Most estimates in this report come from data obtained in March 1999 from the Current Population Survey (CPS). Some estimates are based on data obtained from the CPS in earlier years and from decennial censuses. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the survey every month, although this report uses only March data for its estimates.

[2] Each state estimate should be evaluated using the 90 percent confidence interval around each midpoint. Thus, the estimate for Alaska (92.8 percent +/- 1.5) was not statistically different from order point estimates down through Utah at 91.0 percent (+/- 1.5). When using the state estimates provided from the CPS, users must keep in mind the sampling variability associated with these estimates, which is considerably higher than for estimates based on the nation as a whole. Because of this, year-to-year estimates may fluctuate simply due to the changes in sample in that area over time. While one cannot make precise statements about exact rank or changes in rank over time, the data do provide a general indication of the relative level (that is, high, no difference, or low) of educational attainment across states.

Accuracy and Reliability of the Data

Statistics from sample surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and meet the Census Bureau's standards for statistical significance. Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately answers are coded and classified. The Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production process — including the overall design of surveys, testing the wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and statistical review of reports.

The CPS employs ratio estimation, whereby sample estimates are adjusted to independent estimates of the national population by age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage, but how it affects different variables in the survey is not precisely known. Moreover, biases may also be present when people who are missed in the survey differ from those interviewed in ways other than the categories used in weighting (age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin). All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources. Please contact the Demographic Statistical Methods Division via Internet e-mail at dsmd_s&a@ccmail.census.gov for information on the source of the data, the accuracy of the estimates, the use of standard errors, and the computation of standard errors.

More Information

Detailed tabulations are available (16 detailed tables and 3 historical tables) that provide demographic characteristics of the population by educational attainment. The electronic version of these tables is available on the Internet, at the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Once on the site, click on "Subjects A-Z," then "Educational Attainment."

An abbreviated paper version of these tables is available as PPL-125 for $25. To receive a paper copy, send your request for "PPL-125, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1999," along with a check or money order in the amount of $25.00 payable to **Commerce-Census-88-00-9010**, to U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, P.O. Box 277943, Atlanta, GA 30384-7943, or call the Statistical Information Office at 301-457-2422. A copy of these tabulations will be made available to any existing CPR P20 subscriber without charge, provided that the request is made within 3 months of the issue date of this update. Contact our Statistical Information Office at 301-457-2422.

Contacts

For additional information on these topics, contact Eric C. Newburger or Andrea E. Curry, Education and Social Stratification Branch, on 301-457-2464 or via Internet e-mail (eric.charles.newburger@ccmail.census.gov or acurry@census.gov).

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